

Alexis Smith



*"I became Alexis
teen, when I*

*Smith at seven-
went to college.*

Previously I had been Patti Anne Smith, which was not very appealing. I guess I had the desire to be somebody different, to reinvent myself. I first picked the name Alex arbitrarily from a person in a movie as a sort of a nice, androgynous nickname. Then it turned out that there was an Alexis Smith who was a movie star. So I lengthened the name, and Alexis became my pseudonym."

Smith was born in Los Angeles in 1949. During her childhood, part of which was spent on the grounds of the mental hospital where her father was superintendent, she fashioned narrative collages of words and images cut from popular magazines. After graduating from Whittier High School, Smith enrolled at the newly established University of California, Irvine, intending to study French, but subsequently switched to art. Her collages at this point took on a new,

more serious dimension, as she studied with Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, and Vija Celmins—artists whose conceptual orientations appealed to her narrative-based sensibility.

Smith's collages are inspired by found texts and found things that she combines to create a new dialogue out of familiar words and images. Smith is intrigued by the histories that inanimate objects contain, and she has consciously sought to share these hidden narratives through her art.

The book pieces that constitute her earliest work evolved into wall-bound, horizontal collages of loose pages carrying lengthy quotes selected from a wide range of literary texts, including Thomas Mann and Raymond Chandler. Carefully typed and juxtaposed with small evocative found objects, these pieces functioned as enhanced narratives.

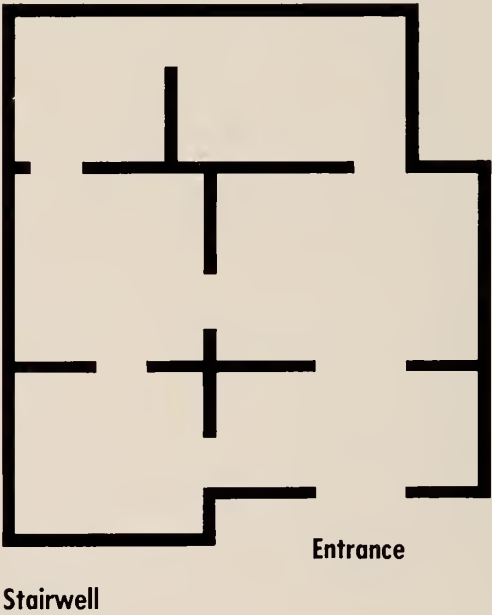
After 1975 Smith became more eclectic in her selection of sources, employing pulp fiction and popular Hollywood myths, in which she saw reflections of our media-generated identities. Her collage format also became more aggressively three dimensional as she embellished frames and altered her found materials. As Smith enriched the physical characteristics of her work, her found objects and images assumed a visual strength equal to, and sometimes even greater than, the appropriated words.

Originally considered among the group of young, conceptually oriented artists whose work told stories, Smith has gradually assumed a singular position in the contemporary art world. Her achievement has been to reinvigorate collage and assemblage by incorporating disparate elements—both textual and three dimensional— into works ranging in scale from small easel-size collages to monumental sculptural ensembles in public places.

The themes Smith has developed in her art, represented here in separate galleries, propose a saga of our time. Collectively, the stories she has reconstructed over the past twenty years form a history of twentieth-century America; individually, each is a poetic provocation of private memories.

Alexis Smith's work has appeared in one-artist and group shows throughout this country and abroad since the mid-1970s. The Whitney Museum of American Art has been exhibiting her work for more than fifteen years, beginning with a one-artist show in 1975. The Museum has included examples of her art in six group exhibitions, among them three Biennials and, most recently, the 1989 "Image World: Art and Media Culture." The present exhibition is the first retrospective survey of Smith's twenty-year achievement.

Second Floor Plan





Wild Life, 1985

In the *Jane* series, Smith used a common name to bind a body of mostly easel-size works that both demonstrate and question the fate of a variety of women. The cumulative impact depends on the especially rich word-image conjunction.

The *Jane* series was an outgrowth of Smith's earliest interest in heroines, personified by the dancer Isadora Duncan. As Smith recalled, "I started with Jane Doe, then I made the comparison between Tarzan and Jane and Jayne Mansfield and Mickey Hargitay being parallels, then I thought of other Jane couples: Dick and Jane, Jane Russell and Howard Hughes, Paul and Jane Bowles. Then I thought of the English Janes: Jane Eyre, Jane Austen, then Calamity Jane." In the fictional and factual Janes, Smith perceived a

metaphorical power. Slang for everywoman, Jane could speak to universal situations. "I started collecting these things and drawing parallels between the lives of these women who had a tough time. I was at a point in my life when you wake up one morning and realize that your life isn't going to work out quite the way you imagined." Though she intended her gender to be self-evident in the work, Smith has repeatedly cautioned in interviews against reading the *Janes* as a feminist tract. Her intentions remained transformative, even aesthetic, rather than sociopolitical. "What I'm trying to do is generate a mythology out of things we experience everyday to give a kind of meaning to everyday life and show the story and patterns as they exist in the things we gloss over."





Bombshell, 1982

By 1982 Smith was appropriating fragments of popular texts, especially the interchangeable, standardized plots of pulp novels, most of them blatantly escapist and written for the female reader. In these texts she found a written counterpart to the physical detritus that constituted her visual vocabulary. By abandoning literature in favor of pulp, she could more fully exploit the iconic effect of her imagery. Henceforth Smith's art would be unabashedly pop in its sources and realization.

The collages of *Christmas Eve, 1943* reek of wartime Los Angeles. Newspaper headlines tell of war maneuvers, men are in a variety of uniforms, a collaged poster hectors "Buy War Bonds"; Smith's titles, such as *Bombshell*, reinforce the period's

frenzied sense of mobilization. Equally important in this work is Smith's new approach to frames. Her once simple plexiglass boxes have become elaborate devices—some found, some fabricated—tailored to enrich the content of the piece. She then silkscreened texts at the bottom of each piece of glass, effecting an overlay of word on image.

In *Christmas Eve, 1943*, Smith once again fabricated a narration from a medley of sources. The title dates the piece to a time Smith knows best through the scavenged memorabilia she hoards. Pages of newspapers, old photographs, movie posters, the faddish flotsam and jetsam of the moment were abundantly available to her in the thrift shops and swap meets that serve as her supply sources. During the 1940s, the decade in which she was born, the war effort had brought thousands of new people to Southern California, hastening its fall from sunny Eden to smoggy metropolis. In this sense, the 1940s may be considered L.A.'s last moment of innocence.

As always with Smith, Hollywood mediates all information—both in tone and in collaged presentation. Perhaps more than ever before in her work, the variously framed units of *Christmas Eve, 1943* function as pages from a script superimposed over stills of its movie.



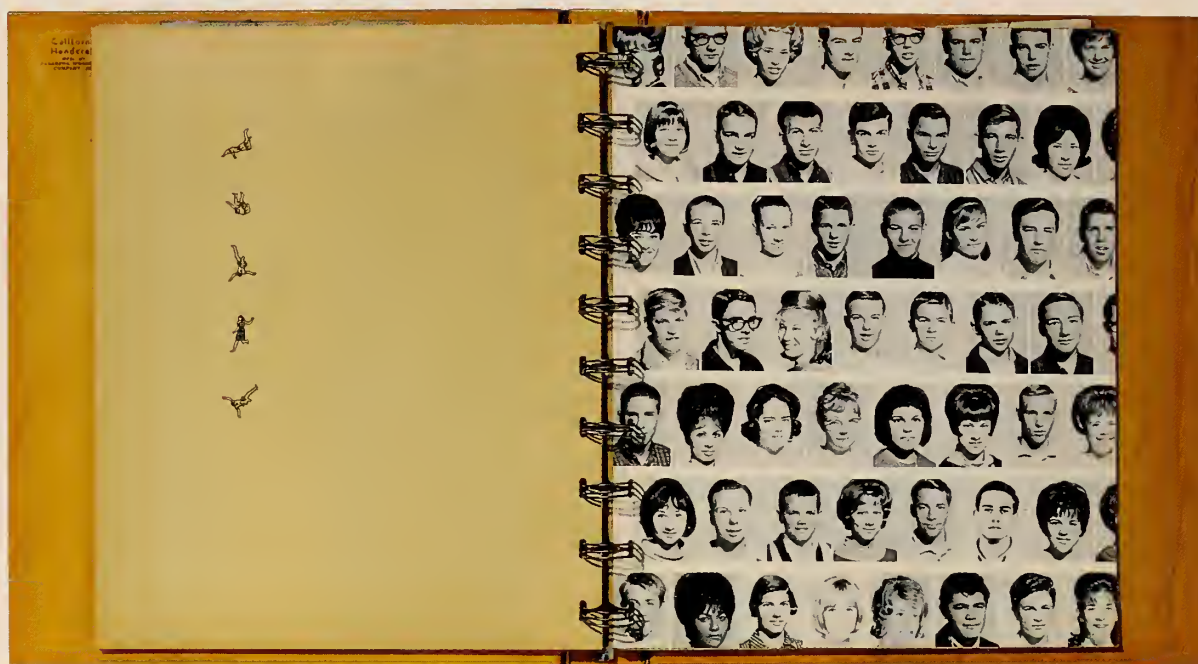


All the Simple Old Fashioned Charm, 1984

Smith excerpted her texts from a variety of authors, among whom Raymond Chandler was a favorite. In Chandler's sardonic, world-weary tone, Smith found a perfectly pitched melody for the darker range in her voice. His graphic metaphors readily spawned physical embellishment; his gritty, urban vocabulary was elegantly amplified by the swap-meet detritus always so attractive to Smith. Situated in and around Los Angeles, Chandler's narratives depict the hard-bitten life of Hollywood, the other side of the shiny coin of the perpetually reinventable self. Life as a series of roles, the Hollywood promise, suited Smith's own narrational needs.

The Big Sleep (Requiem for Raymond Chandler) (1978), *Golden State* (1980), and *All the Simple Old Fashioned Charm* (1984) exemplify Smith's approaches to integrating word and image. The consumerist exhortations painted on the wall behind *Golden State*, for example, silently echo the jaded tone of Chandler's tale. The stylized advertisements also mark a change in Smith's conception of the relationship between collaged object and ground. The size of the ground is exponentially increased by the decorated wall, so that the framed collage in its entirety becomes another object.



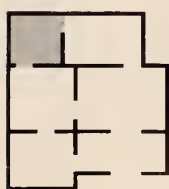


Colorado, 1971

Colorado (1971), a wood-encased photo album, its cover decorated with the raised letters "Colorado," is the fullest exposition of Smith's early techniques and ambitions. The action of turning the pages punctuates an ambiguous and spare narrative. The words "hiss, clang, sizzle, crackle, pop," stenciled on various individual pages, introduce an aural component to Smith's story. A double-page spread marked "Ars Longa" features postcards of the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, and one of the great pyramids. An ordinary yearbook photograph of schoolboys and girls follows, then a spread with the words "Ars Longa, Vita Brevis" ("art is long, life is short"). A De Stijl painting has been altered to resemble a waste receptacle; on a later page the joke is reiterated by the word "guffaw" stenciled sideways. A subsequent publicity shot of the ever glamorous actress Alexis Smith, adorned with the two artists'

interchangeable autograph, prepares us for a final exhortation: "clap." Ending the piece with this stage direction reinforces the cinematic quality of the book. Like all film animation, it is a series of conjoined stills, and it haughtily declares in Latin its relative immortality. Part souvenir—the class photo—and part prediction—behold the new likeness of Alexis Smith!—the piece is a charming aggrandizement of her artistic personality-in-formation.

Larger themes, all filtered through Hollywood narration, occupied Smith for the next few years. From the otherness of Charlie Chan and the tragic fates of Orpheus and *Beauty and the Beast*, to the operatic melodramas of *Madame Butterfly* and *The Red Shoes*, Smith worked with an array of screenplay narratives that enabled her to outgrow her preoccupation with self and look to a wider social scope.





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<http://archive.org/details/alexissmith124smit>

Two interconnected groups of work, *On the Road* and *Eldorado*, conclude Smith's examination of Edenic California. Wall-bound and freestanding constructions, they are elaborations on her traditional collage format. Both the pieces in *On the Road* and those in *Eldorado* were inspired by Jack Kerouac's paean to wanderlust and postwar America, *On the Road*. Published in 1957, Kerouac's book tells of a cross-country drive that is the Beat generation's *Pilgrim's Progress*. In a 1983 interview, Smith, describing how she functioned as an artist in Los Angeles, had praised the automobile as a powerful extension of her artistic need to organize things and as a place of meditative solitude conducive to thinking. As she concluded, "I think cars are really wonderful; they've become the twentieth-century archetype for libido, power, purpose, destiny and control." These two series reasserted more graphically than ever Smith's deep attraction to the signs and symbols of outdoor advertising and to the visual-verbal literacy it spawned. Her search for a common vocabulary had, in fact, led her to two, often intersecting, languages—one represented by the verbal clichés and images of Hollywood, the other by the words and icons of the American automobile culture.

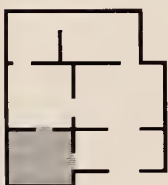
Kerouac's saga offered countless vignettes of the life on the road that is the quintessential American experience. Smith's longtime preoccupation with the



Rocky Road, 1990

symbols of time, travel, and romance coalesced perfectly with Kerouac's story. His verbal panorama formed a harmonious counterpoint to the array of images Smith had at hand.

With the works in *On the Road* and *Eldorado*, Smith's subjects moved forward in time from pre-World War II America to its more recent past. Her art had evolved in focus from a literary one that largely comprised twentieth-century classics (mostly written before 1940) to such sources as Kerouac and rock-and-roll lyrics of the 1960s. By joining more commonplace, often media-derived messages to her usual, ordinary objects, Smith shed all vestiges of formal reserve and made her work unapologetically public in scale and its address. It had transcended the constraints of its origins in collage.



Works in the Exhibition

Unless otherwise indicated, dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Colorado, 1971

Loose-leaf book with collage pages, 11×10½ each
Collection of the artist

Ma-chees-ma, 1971

Paper collage, 14×11
Collection of the actress
Alexis Smith

The Keynote to Success, 1974

Paper collage, 12½×18½
Collection of James and
Linda Burrows

Movies and Dreams, 1974–75

Paper collage, two panels,
14¼×47¼ each
Collection of Herbert Hirsh and
Bette Hirsh

Madame Butterfly, 1975

Mixed-media collage, two panels,
12½×71 each
Collection of Patricia Faure

The Red Shoes, 1975

Mixed-media collage, two panels,
13½×63; 13½×54½
Collection of the Grinstein Family

Words Cannot Cook Rice—Charlie Chan, 1975

Mixed-media collage, 12×9¼
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene
D. Brody

Stairway to the Stars, 1976

Mixed-media collage, 12×9
Collection of John Solomon

The Big Sleep (Requiem for Raymond Chandler), 1978

Mixed-media collage, 14½×83¼
Collection of Richard Levine

Card, 1978

Paper collage, 11¾×9¼
Collection of the artist, courtesy
Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles

Chandlerism #1, 1978

Mixed-media collage, 12×9¼
Collection of George and Pearl
Yewell

Chandlerism #9, 1978

Mixed-media collage, 12×9¼
Collection of Lyn and Norman
Lear

Chandlerism #10, 1978

Mixed-media collage, 12×9¼
Collection of Judy and Stuart
Spence

Chandlerism #12, 1978

Mixed-media collage, 12¾×9½
The Chase Manhattan Bank, NA

Chandlerism #19, 1978

Mixed-media collage, 12×9¼
Collection of Richard Wiegand

Chandlerism #22, 1978

Mixed-media collage, 12¼×9½
Private collection

Chandlerism #25, 1978

Mixed-media collage, 12×9¼
Collection of Richard Wiegand

Chandlerism #29, 1978

Mixed-media collage, 12×9¼
Collection of Joy and Jerry
Monkarsh

Chandlerism #30, 1978

Mixed-media collage, 12×9¼
Collection of Diana Zlotnick

Chandlerism #31, 1978

Mixed-media collage, 12×9¼
Collection of the Grinstein Family

Cannery Row, 1980

Mixed-media collage,
13½×70×1½
Collection of Anne and
William J. Hokin

Downtown, 1980

Mixed-media collage, 12¾×62¾
Private collection

Golden State, 1980

Mixed-media collage on sandpaper,
three panels, 14×48; 14×57;
14×48
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis;
Gift of Audrey Taylor Pretorius
Gonzales, 1986

Hello Hollywood, 1980

Mixed-media collage, five panels,
9½×21 each
Collection of Raymond J. Learsy

Mean Streets, 1980

Mixed-media collage on aluminum
printing plates, 16×72½
Collection of Harold I. Huttas

Newsreel, 1980

Mixed-media collage on aluminum
printing plates, 16×41¾
Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles

Stardust, 1980

Mixed-media collage, 12×60
Collection of Martin Sklar

Cathay, 1981

Mixed-media collages,
12×10 each
Collection of the artist

Blonde Venus, 1982

Mixed-media collage,
20¼×16¼
Collection of Renee Vollen

Bloody Mary, 1982

Mixed-media collage, 20⅞×17⅞
Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles

Bombshell, 1982

Mixed-media collage, 17⅞×12⅞
Collection of Merry Norris

El Cartero Siempre Llama Dos Veces, 1982

Mixed-media collage, three
panels, 21⅝×13¾ each
Collection of Clyde and Karen
Beswick

Christmas Eve, 1943, 1982

Mixed-media collage, two panels,
20½×17½; 20½×17
San Diego Museum of Art; Gift of
the Frederick R. Weisman
Foundation

Coconut Grove, 1982

Mixed-media collage, 21½×18½
The Capital Group, Inc.,
Los Angeles

Danger, Curves Ahead, 1982

Mixed-media collage, three panels,
20⅞×17⅞;
21⅞×18⅞; 24×16
Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles

Ebb Tide, 1982

Mixed-media collage, 21×18¼
The Walt Disney Company

Happy Hunting Ground, 1982

Mixed-media collage, 17½×25¾
Collection of the artist

If Looks Could Kill, 1982

Mixed-media collage, two panels,
15¼×12¾ each
Collection of Jonathan C. Ahearn

It's Lucky When You Live in America, 1982

Mixed-media collage, 21⅜×18½
Collection of Lenore and Bernard
Greenberg

Madame X, 1982

Mixed-media collage, 21⅜×18½
Collection of Richard Rosenzweig
and Judy Henning

Mustang Sally, 1982

Mixed-media collage, $20\frac{5}{8} \times 16\frac{3}{4}$
Collection of Alan Shayne and Norman Sunshine

Satan's Satellites, 1982

Painted wall with hubcaps,
 13×13 feet
Collection of the artist

Sea of Tranquility, 1982

Mixed-media collage, $20\frac{3}{8} \times 17\frac{5}{8}$
Collection of the artist

Snapshot, 1982

Mixed-media collage, $21\frac{3}{4} \times 20$
Collection of Harold I. Huttas

Tokyo Rose, 1982

Mixed-media collage, $21\frac{1}{4} \times 16$
Collection of Lawrence M. Kauvar

All the Simple Old Fashioned Charm, 1984

Lacquer on wood, $34 \times 17\frac{1}{4} \times 19\frac{1}{2}$
Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles

Another World, 1985

Mixed-media collage, $24\frac{1}{2} \times 19\frac{3}{4}$
Security Pacific Bank, Los Angeles

The Ape Man, 1985

Mixed-media collage, $29\frac{1}{8} \times 21\frac{1}{4}$
Collection of Douglas S. Cramer

Asphalt Jungle, 1985

Mixed-media collage, two panels,
 $45\frac{1}{8} \times 25$ each
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The El Paso Natural Gas Company Fund for California Art

Calamity and Deadwood, 1985

Mixed-media collage, two panels,
 $24\frac{5}{8} \times 18\frac{1}{8}$ each
Collection of Andres and Vanessa Moraga

Calamity Jane, 1985

Mixed-media collage, two panels,
 $32 \times 20\frac{3}{4}$ each
Collection of Anne and William J. Hokin

Days of Our Lives, 1985

Mixed-media collage, $24\frac{1}{2} \times 19\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of John Margulies

The Girl Can't Help It, 1985

Mixed-media collage, two panels,
 $26\frac{1}{8} \times 18\frac{7}{8}$ each
Collection of Merry Norris

Hell on Wheels, 1985

Mixed-media collage, $32\frac{3}{4} \times 21\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of Laila and Thurston Twigg-Smith

Lady Jane, 1985

Mixed-media collage, $22\frac{3}{4} \times 22\frac{3}{4}$
Collection of Diane Dixon and Lavi Daniel

Men Seldom Make Passes at Girls**Who Wear Glasses, 1985**

Mixed-media collage on painted wall: two panels, $27 \times 33 \times 5$ each;
 10×15 feet $\times 5$ inches overall
Collection of the artist

Me Tarzan, You Jane, 1985

Mixed-media collage, two panels,
 $19 \times 15\frac{1}{2}$ each
Collection of Peg and Chuck Rosenquist

The Perfect Couple, 1985

Mixed-media collage, $38\frac{3}{8} \times 30\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. Woods

Wild Life, 1985

Mixed-media collage, $18\frac{3}{8} \times 16\frac{3}{8}$
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California; Gift of Bruce Murkoff

Bob White, 1986

Mixed-media collage, $12\frac{7}{8} \times 10\frac{3}{4}$
Collection of Margo Leavin

The Holy Road, 1988

Mixed-media collage, $38\frac{3}{4} \times 31\frac{3}{4}$
Collection of Richard Rouillard

Mercury, 1988

Mixed-media collage, two panels,
 $43\frac{3}{4} \times 36\frac{5}{8}$ each
Collection of James and Linda Burrows

Miss America, 1988

Mixed-media collage, $36\frac{3}{8} \times 35\frac{7}{16}$
Collection of Nina MacConnel

Rock of Ages, 1988

Mixed-media collage, $54\frac{1}{4} \times 90\frac{5}{16}$
The Capital Group, Inc., Los Angeles

Route 66, 1988

Mixed-media collage, $31\frac{1}{4} \times 21$
Collection of Bernard and Rosalie Kornblau

Running on Empty, 1988

Mixed-media collage, $34\frac{1}{2} \times 74\frac{7}{16}$
High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Gift of The Eli Broad Family Foundation, 1988.46

Seven Wonders, 1988

Mixed-media collage, $47\frac{1}{4} \times 41$
Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles

Blue Chip, 1989

Paper collage, $14\frac{3}{16} \times 12\frac{7}{8}$
Collection of James and Linda Burrows

Lonesome Traveler, 1989

Mixed-media collage,
 $20\frac{5}{8} \times 15\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{8}$
Collection of Rosamund Felsen

Moonlight Serenade, 1989

Mixed-media collage, $32\frac{3}{4} \times 38\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of Anne and William J. Hokin

Blue Denim, 1990

Mixed-media collage, $44\frac{1}{2} \times 57$
Collection of Mandy and Cliff Einstein

Eldorado, 1990

Mixed-media collage, $51\frac{1}{2} \times 65\frac{3}{4}$
Collection of Maurice Marciano

Fruits 'n' Nuts, 1990

Mixed-media collage,
 $35\frac{1}{4} \times 24 \times 16$
Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles

Jack, 1990

Mixed-media collage, $71\frac{1}{2} \times 93$
Collection of Laila and Thurston Twigg-Smith

Peaches, 1990

Mixed-media collage, $20\frac{1}{2} \times 20 \times 3$
Collection of the artist

Rocky Road, 1990

Mixed-media collage,
two panels, 64×23 each
Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles

Exhibition Itinerary

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York
November 21, 1991–March 1, 1992

The Museum of Contemporary Art,
Los Angeles
March 29–July 5, 1992

Events

December 5, 6:30 pm

Lecture

"Landscape of Signs"

Dave Hickey, author and critic

Admission: \$10.00; members \$8.00;
students with ID \$6.00.

Tickets may be purchased at the Sales Desk or by mail through the Education Department. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Following the lecture, members are invited to join Dave Hickey and Richard Armstrong, curator of the exhibition, for an informal discussion and buffet supper at Sarabeth's at the Whitney. For buffet price and reservations, call (212) 570-3641.

December 9, 10 am–4 pm

Teachers' Workshop

In conjunction with the exhibition, there will be a workshop for New York City high school teachers. For further information and reservations, call the Artreach office at (212) 570-3655.

Publications

Alexis Smith by Richard Armstrong, with a contribution by Amy Gerstler. 244 pages, 227 illustrations, 191 in color. Published by the Whitney Museum in association with Rizzoli, New York. Paper \$27.50

Exhibition poster, designed by the artist.
36 × 24 inches. \$10.00

Alexis Smith: Life in America, 28-minute videotape by Peter Kirby. \$39.95

Tours

Free gallery tours of the exhibition are given at 2:30 pm, Tuesday–Friday, and at 3:30 pm on Saturday and Sunday.

Private tours of the exhibition may be arranged for a nominal fee. For information call (212) 606-0395, Monday, 10 am–1 pm, and Thursday, 1–5 pm.

School groups may arrange for guided tours of the exhibition by calling (212) 570-3655.

The exhibition at the Whitney Museum is supported by a generous grant from The Bohen Foundation with additional funding from the National Committee of the Whitney Museum, the National Endowment for the Arts, and an anonymous donor.

Photographs:

Douglas M. Parker, except **Bombshell**.

Cover:

Alexis Smith in her studio, 1985

Photograph by Jim McHugh

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